



PRIME MINISTER

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER

NATIONAL IMMIGRATION OUTLOOK CONFERENCE

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I want at the outset to congratulate John Nieuwenhuysen and the Bureau of Immigration Research for the way in which they have arranged and conducted this important Conference.

I welcome the research experts and policy specialists from academia and government who will be bringing their special skills to bear on the important issues of immigration and ethnic affairs.

And I particularly welcome the presence of organisations representing the broader community: churches, ethnic groups, unions, businesses.

The nation's policies on immigration and ethnic affairs are the responsibility of all Australians - not the preserve of a policy elite. Thanks to this Conference, Australians have the opportunity they deserve to subject these key policy areas to an unparalleled scrutiny.

It will be rigorous and comprehensive scrutiny, dispassionate and sophisticated - precisely the qualities whose absence from public discussion about immigration prompted the Federal Government to establish the Bureau of Immigration Research last year.

It is not too long ago that the phrase "immigration debate" had been distorted to become a code-word for those who wanted to cut the level of immigration - and in particular for those who wanted to do so by reintroducing racial criteria into our selection procedures.

Compared to those days, the immigration debate now gives off much less heat and much more light.

From every point of view, that is a welcome change.

Because of course there are important and legitimate questions about immigration that deserve calm discussion and careful study - sensible questions about the overall size, make up, administration and impact of immigration, including its impact on the Australian economy and the Australian environment.

In endeavouring to answer these issues, our starting point must not be, and is not: by what means can the criterion of race be reintroduced to our selection procedures?

Our starting point is not: how can the immigration clock be turned back to the 1950s and 1960s?

The starting point is: how best can the public be informed about the totality of immigration and ethnic affairs programs so that legitimate questions can be answered and positive improvements made where necessary - and so that baseless concerns and fears are put to rest?

In few countries is this more important and more relevant than in Australia.

Since 1788 we have been, and we essentially remain, a land of migrants - a community built up and made strong by waves of new settlers who have over two centuries invested their diverse skills and boundless hopes on making a new life for themselves and their families in this country.

By the end of the Second World War, with a population of just over seven million, Australia embarked on a massive program to quicken the pace of immigration.

Since then, the annual intake has varied widely - swinging from a high of 185,000 in 1970 to a low of 53,000 in 1975. The target for 1990-91 is 126,000

But the basic thrust of large-scale migration to Australia has been consistent; our migration program has been one of the largest in the world relative to the size of our population. Since the Second World War, 60 per cent of our population growth has been supplied by migration.

And over that period, too, the pool of countries and cultures from which migrants have been selected has gradually widened. Today, about one in five Australian residents was born overseas, in one of more than 130 nations around the world.

One of the central issues of this Conference is the question of the impact of this mass immigration - in particular, its impact on the Australian economy.

A simple balance sheet of immigration would show

- on one side, that immigrants contribute to economic capacity through supplying more labour, especially skilled labour;

- and on the other, that immigrants make demands on that economic capacity through immediate consumption, and demands for housing and public services.

It's not surprising that the downside of the balance sheet often receives greater public attention - especially in times of national economic difficulties.

It's entirely understandable in such times that some people might see migration making competition for jobs tougher.

It's understandable - and especially so as our awareness of the importance of the environment increases - that some people might see population pressures threatening our fragile continent and depleting our resources.

It's understandable - but regrettable - that some people will assume that the help new arrivals receive as they settle in Australia amounts to special privileges denied long-term residents.

And it's understandable - though wrong - that some people argue that immigration runs counter to the nation's essential economic task of reducing its current account deficit and inflation.

I don't agree with any of those arguments, but I describe them as understandable because we have hitherto lacked the data that would enable us to determine the precise costs and benefits of immigration.

Of course, it was to provide such detailed analysis that we established the Bureau of Immigration Research.

And I note with satisfaction the conclusions of the Bureau's initial studies.

The recent publication, Australian Immigration, A Survey of the Issues, concludes that available research seems to suggest that immigration generally confers positive economic benefits.

None of the complaints about migrants taking Australian jobs bears close academic scrutiny. Indeed, "the evidence strongly refutes the claim that immigration leads to increases in unemployment", according to the survey.

In other words, the balance sheet analysis comes out in the black. The debate is about the scale of the benefits.

And this very important point needs to be understood.

The economic purpose of immigration from the Government's point of view is not to achieve specific goals such as a lower current account deficit or higher exports.

Those who argue about the alleged inflationary or debt-creating nature of immigration miss the point.

There are more efficient arms of policy that can be applied to meet broad macro-economic goals; immigration is not a tap that can be simply turned on or off to fine tune the economy.

The economic purpose of immigration - in addition to its international humanitarian and family reunion aspects - is to strengthen the productive capacity of the economy.

Like any other form of investment in our country, immigration may involve short-term costs, but it can produce long-term benefits - and it is the Government's very clear aim to ensure those benefits are achieved.

We should all be proud that our immigration procedures no longer discriminate on grounds of race.

At the same time, our selection does discriminate a great deal - as it should - on economic grounds.

The points system discriminates heavily in favour of applicants who are young, whose jobs skills are in demand in Australia, and who can speak English - while recognising too, fundamental humanitarian and family values.

In other words we have a sophisticated and dynamic means of choosing among applicants directed precisely at enhancing our national productive capacity -

- . The skill level of immigrants has risen steadily under my Government. In fact, migrants generally have higher skills than the resident population, and healthy labour force participation rates. This high rate of employment enhances the scope for economic gains.
- . The family reunion and humanitarian categories of immigration include sizeable elements of skilled labour. It is too often overlooked that many family members are now selected on the basis of skills.
- . The relative youth of the migrant intake delivers longer term benefits for our productive capacity and improves our ability to support dependent groups - a significant point as the baby-boom generation leaves the workforce over the next couple of decades and begins to rely on community support through age pensions.
- . Immigrants do bring new ideas, techniques and experiences. They provide the potential for expanding domestic markets, which enhances the adoption and diffusion of new technology.

So we are creating, through immigration, a much stronger, more powerful, more resilient economy - one that should enable us better to meet the challenges of competitive world markets.

And we are also creating a dynamic and cohesive community. The skilled migrant of today may be the sponsor of the family reunion migrant of tomorrow; Australia consciously rejected any sort of guestworker scheme, where rich countries use up the labour of people from less well off countries and then send them home. That has been tried elsewhere - and has proven unsuccessful. We don't want to create second-class citizens with a transient commitment to Australia; we want their permanent commitment to Australia, as full citizens of and participants in our nation. That is the best way - probably the only way - to a coherent, harmonious society.

So it is simply not true to claim, as some have done, that Australia has an uncontrolled program, or that our capacity as a sovereign nation to determine who should and should not enter our country has been diminished and compromised.

Immigration is a tightly controlled process; each year, our embassies and consulates around the world turn away hundreds of thousands of people who do not meet our tight entry requirements.

An integral aspect of the immigration program is the attraction of migrants whose potential lies not in their job skills but in their capital wealth and entrepreneurial skills.

The business migration program has brought to Australia not only new funding for businesses here but new know-how and important social links that can help improve our trading position.

The Business Migration Program has received considerable scrutiny recently. In order to ensure it achieves its objectives the Government has recently implemented mechanisms to reduce the risk of fraud and impropriety, including the inspection of bank accounts and formalised means for the verification of the transfer of applicants' funds to Australia. Overall, however, business migration remains of significant benefit to Australia.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have said on many occasions that I favour a larger population for Australia. I describe myself as a higher immigration man rather than a lower immigration man.

I have said that ideally Australia might have a population of about 25 million by 2015 or 2020 - but there are too many hypotheticals to make any such assumption a worthwhile population target for Australia.

But I make very clear the thrust of Government policy: we believe that with proper planning, Australia has the capacity to absorb a growing population.

I repeat: with proper planning and provision.

We are of course seeking to resolve, through the ecologically sustainable development processes, the inevitable conflicts that arise about environmental protection. We are bringing together unions, developers, environmentalists and State Governments in working groups that will help us as a community make decisions in the future that are fully informed about the costs and benefits of development proposals.

Clearly, environmental threats can be posed by people - by growing cities, by heavier infrastructure use, by increased traffic in national parks - as much as by traditional economic activities. We have to find the right balance here.

To this end, the Government is to ask the National Population Council to examine the major issues which flow from the increase in Australia's population, as a result both of net migration and natural increase.

The Council has a membership of economists, demographers and sociologists, as well as representatives of the conservation movement, trade unions and business, so it is well equipped for the task.

I will be asking the Council to examine all pertinent matters - including the impact of population increase on the economy, environment, human service delivery, infrastructure, social equity and international obligations.

I want the Council to consult widely and to prepare a discussion paper by next September, so that it will be available for the Government's consideration, together with the reports from the working groups on ecologically sustainable development.

Ladies and gentlemen,

One of the reasons that Australian immigration has been such a remarkable success story is that throughout the post-war period, immigration has enjoyed broad bipartisan support at the parliamentary level and broad community support.

Our methods of selecting and rejecting migrant applicants; our annual targets; our policies for post-arrival settlement; our recognition of Australia as a multicultural society; our commitment to citizenship have all enjoyed the support of both major political parties.

There was of course one brief and recent departure from this, when the Opposition parties jettisoned multiculturalism and toyed with the reintroduction of racial criteria in migrant selection.

I note the Federal Opposition still has difficulties voicing any kind of enthusiasm for multiculturalism, while seeming to accept most of the policies embraced by that term.

But it is my very profound hope that bipartisanship will return to the landscape of immigration and ethnic affairs.

When bipartisanship was breached, I had no reluctance about fighting the political battle in defence of an immigration policy free of racial discrimination.

But I stress in this audience that there are two vitally important policy reasons for wanting to see bipartisanship back in place.

First, it will mean that where the immigration program needs to be adjusted and fine-tuned in the future, as it has been in the past, those changes can be made smoothly and efficiently.

And second, it will deny any vestige of credibility to those extreme minority elements in the community who seek to turn the clock back to racist selection procedures, or who seek to undermine the firm foundations that have been laid for national unity in our culturally diverse society.

Ladies and gentlemen,

From the xenophobic days of White Australia, we have created an immigration program that has brought to our shores the cultures, languages, and skills of the whole world.

We are a diverse and exciting society - a far cry from the essentially monocultural post-war Australia that embarked on the great campaign of immigration.

I don't believe anyone today would want to sacrifice the enormous lifestyle benefits each of us enjoys from living in such a country in the 1990s.

And the most important thing is that for all the diversity of our nation, we are still a united people in a cohesive community.

We are linked together by the strong bonds of our shared adherence to the institutions and practices of parliamentary democracy, and by our shared tolerant acceptance of individual freedoms within the rule of law - in short, we are united by our shared commitment to Australia.

As a political leader, it is my obligation to ensure that this commitment remains an abiding element of Australia's national character.

I say this for two reasons.

The first is obvious. Australia cannot afford to slide into the tragic circumstances that afflict other parts of the world, by allowing racial, ethnic or sectarian divisions to destroy our harmony, our productivity and our way of life.

The reverse is equally true and equally important. By showing that people of diverse cultures can live together with tolerance, in a productive and harmonious community, we will be providing a model to the world and earning the respect of the international community.

The internationalisation of the world economy, the development of global telecommunications networks, the growth of service-based industries such as tourism and education - these are all making a reality of the "global village".

In such a world, our links of trade, cultural exchange and people-to-people contact are reinforced by our being a truly multicultural community.

And as a society that has for more than four decades fulfilled our humanitarian obligations to provide safe haven for people displaced by war and hardship in their own countries, we have earned international respect and influence.

These broader benefits of immigration are very difficult to quantify in a strict econometric sense.

But they are real benefits and enduring ones nonetheless.

So I urge you in your deliberations at this Conference to cast the net of your inquiry and discussion as wide as possible.

The real questions are: what kind of Australia do we want to live in and bequeath to our children? And in what ways can an immigration program help us build that kind of Australia?

Having posed the questions, let me answer them in this way.

I want to see an Australia with a modern growing economy; an Australia that is self-confidently enmeshed in the world economy and the dynamism of our own region; an Australia renowned for the quality of its life, not just the quantity of its economic output; an Australia speaking in the forums of the world with an independent voice to help shape a better world; and Australia that vibrantly and fully reflects the truth that all people are entitled to equal opportunity irrespective of colour, race or creed.

With those goals, there is no doubt in my mind of the positive and enriching contribution to be made by a continuing immigration program, harnessing the skills of the people of the world to build a stronger Australian economy and drawing on the strength of their cultural traditions to build a confident, dynamic and culturally diverse Australia.

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